

Tracheostomy - Post Operative Instructions

Surgery

Surgery to place a breathing tube in the neck usually involves general anesthesia, typically for about one hour. Patients may be sedated for several hours after surgery and may remain sleepy for much of the day. You may have nausea or vomiting, but it usually goes away by the evening of surgery without additional medication. Most patients stay 4-5 nights in the hospital after surgery. This is so the tracheostomy tube can be changed prior to discharge. It also takes several days to “get used” to having a tracheostomy tube and to learn how to care for the tracheostomy. During the hospital stay, arrangements are made for home suction and supplies needed to care for the tracheostomy at home.

Your Tracheostomy

Your tracheostomy will have a balloon to keep secretions from entering the airway. The balloon will be inflated for about 24 hours after surgery. During that time you will not be able to talk. You can write to communicate during that time. Once the balloon is deflated, some patients can be fit with a speaking valve to allow breathing through the tracheostomy and also allow talking. This is called a “Passy Muir” valve (you can read about it at passy-muir.com). It is normal to have secretions from the tracheostomy after surgery.

For the first few days, the secretions will be bloody, clearing later to look like mucous. This drainage is significant for the first few weeks but decreases with time. A suction machine will be arranged for your home to help manage these secretions.

Getting used to having a tracheostomy and taking care of a new tracheostomy takes some time. Education for this starts while you are in the hospital and continues at home if needed. You will learn to change your tracheostomy and to clean, change and remove the inner cannula. You will also have to learn how to swallow with the tracheostomy tube in place because it feels different and takes some getting used to.

Medication

Most patients do not need pain medications once they go home from the hospital. No other medications are required.

General Information

- Increased coughing is normal after a tracheostomy from the tube “tickling” the inner airway. This decreases with time
- Secretions from the tracheostomy are common and also decrease with time
- Swallowing feels different after a tracheostomy tube. Your voice box and trachea move up and down during swallowing motions. This feels different at first. Take it slow when re-learning to eat and drink after your tracheostomy tube is placed
- Tracheostomy tubes can be removed when they are no longer needed for breathing to be safe. Removing the tracheostomy will leave a small scar once healed
- Normally, the air you breathe is warmed and moistened by your nose and mouth. With a tracheostomy tube, air must be moistened other ways. It is important to drink fluids and to use a humidifier, unless your doctor says otherwise
- If you go outside in the cold weather, it’s important to loosely cover the tracheostomy tube with gauze or a lint-free cloth to warm the air you breathe and to prevent cold air from irritating your windpipe

- When taking a shower, wear a protective cover or shower shield over the tracheostomy and direct the water spray at your chest, not your face and neck. Be careful to keep soap, water, powders, and sprays away from your tracheostomy opening

Reasons to Call Your Surgeon's Office

- Persistent fever over 101° F
- Bleeding (solid blood 1-2 tablespoons) from the tracheostomy site
- Increased swelling around the tracheostomy tube
- Pain that is not relieved by your medications
- If your tracheostomy tube becomes dislodged and you can't get it back in, you should go to the emergency room.